

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University-LAB evaluation visit was conducted on May 24-28, 1999 at its headquarters in Providence, Rhode Island. Having reviewed extensively advanced materials on the laboratory and having interviewed numerous staff members, board of governors, and other related personnel, I submit the following interim evaluation report.

This regional educational laboratory has adopted a mission to improve teaching and learning and advance systemic school improvement by increasing capacity for reform and by forming strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policymaking community. The three major goals which the staff has identified include the following:

- To improve teaching and learning
- To build capacity to implement systemic reform
- To create partnerships and strategic alliances that sustain results

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

The organizational placement of the LAB within Brown University allows for a degree of flexibility and creativity essential to fulfilling expectations of the contract. The Education Alliance is the structural home for this particular REL and has been in existence for 20 years. This long history of the

Alliance in a highly respected institution of higher learning serves as a substantive foundation for the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory. Leadership in the university and laboratory acknowledges each other as being mutual resources upon which to draw for educational improvement within this geographical area.

The administration of Brown University claims that it is “a private institution with a public mission”. There is evidence at Brown to embrace the notion that this institution supports educational reform, a major emphasis of the LAB. To name a few, Brown’s Center for Race and Ethnicity, Annenberg Institute, Public Policy Center, the laboratory collaborates and interfaces with these entities in order to broaden its programmatic impact within the region.

Observations throughout the week indicate that this laboratory is working effectively toward realizing the goals of its five-year contract. Being that this lab is relatively new (i.e., three years), the observer can see much progress in needs assessment, program planning, curriculum design, educational standards, and school reform.

Meetings with groups such as the Dean’s Forum, policymakers, organizational leaders, partnership boards, school district superintendents, etc. are examples of efforts by the LAB to establish and promote networking.

1. Strengths

- a. Focused management team who is open with communication and committed to ensuring quality service and products for clientele in the region
- b. Clear organizational structure supported by the Education Alliance at Brown
- c. Collaboration with other agencies and organizations contributing to the laboratory’s mission; these affiliations are steady and sustaining linkages

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Examining cultural void in the LAB's management, realizing the broad diversity within the northeast
- b. Evidence needing to be more clearly identified that the REL is actively reaching out and meeting needs of the islands affiliated with the laboratory and maintaining a degree of consistency

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

The REL is cognizant at all levels of the need to monitor itself in order to promote activities to meet customer needs. Interviews with a wide range of staff show that the LAB is en route to satisfying this requirement. Regional educational laboratories are confronted with a variety of issues in working with their constituencies, and in doing so it is essential to institute internal monitoring processes to ensure success. Brown has four primary management systems accessible to the LAB that assist this REL to monitor its work. These systems are budgetary, grants management, legal, and personnel.

Networks and partnerships, which have been integrally put in place, provide feedback to the laboratory in strengthening its management and promoting its credibility. Two examples of this are the Center for Resource Management and the Center for Applied Linguistics. In addition to these linkages, a character of the LAB is the existence of multiple layers to its self-review process. There are program council meetings, e-mail interactions, regular staff meetings, cross-project sharing, quarterly reporting on tasks, annual reviews, board of governors interactions, state liaison system, and self-assessments, each contributing to effective checks and balances in meeting established goals and adapting activities germane to local, state, and regional customers.

To cite a specific case of adapting activities in response to feedback and customer needs, one only has to note that this laboratory took the necessary steps to cut back from six to three projects in

the Virgin Islands. At the request of this territory, the LAB felt that its services would be more focused and local priorities would be better met.

As noted by representation from the LAB's Board of Governors, the research and development concentration by the staff members continues to be fine-tuned through internal/external monitoring. This data source reports that this REL within the last three years has terminated three contracts (Hunter - Super Teams - BBM) and has begun to redirect some of its work, realizing that there are realistic expectations regarding how much can be accomplished within this relatively large region with staff and time constraints.

1. Strengths

- a. Quality assurance method systematically implemented internally and externally
- b. Accessibility to boards and individuals for open review
- c. Strong networks and partnerships within the region
- d. Active and committed Board of Governors

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Enhancing breadth of the external and independent review process for broader diversity

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

This particular regional education laboratory prides itself in developing quality products and services which can be useful to clients in the region and have substantial impact, even potentially outside the region. Signature Work #1, Implementing Standards with English Language Learners, is a clear example of the staff's engaging itself in thorough needs assessment measures and a review of the

literature to justify the outlay of resources to adequately address identified needs in the Northeast. This foundation served as the basis for professional staff to exert a prolific number of hours working with teachers and administrators, especially in the Lowell, Massachusetts school district, in order to bring some unity among teachers providing instruction for "language minority students." The work leading to professional development activities is accompanied by an impressive research draft handout for teachers, "Selected Readings for Standards Implementation with English Language Learners." The current nature of these entries and the span of publication dates (1990 - 1999) suggest breadth and depth of the research. As the teachers of English, bilingual teachers, and those providing instruction as teachers of English as a Second Language become involved in implementing the related standards, the comprehensive, broad-based view of existing literature appears to be even more significant.

Quality assurance is certainly not being neglected, for it serves as a central component of the management system. The leadership of LAB envisions the interval dimension of this challenge as being vital to planning, documentation, and dissemination. Therefore, a program manual has been developed in addition to using Apt Associates as a key external evaluator.

The Signature #1 project reports the use of field notes, classroom visitations, follow-up talks, teacher questionnaires, telephone calls, archival e-mail messages, conversations with school administrators, audio-taped interviews, professional development sessions, and artifacts from school visits as sources of data collection in research and development. The 172 classroom visitations during year #1 and the use of 63 teachers during year #2 as the project staff diligently endured co-development of sustainable strategies through professional development (student work protocol, peer visitations, standards analysis) warrant acknowledgement as the third year of a five-year contract period began. During the most recent year, one of development, a videotape was in the process of

being produced in order to further reflect and explore a sustainable strategy of professional development and implementation for said project, sharing learnings from Signature Work #1. As one person stated, *"I believe there is a poetic evolution."*

The Northeast and Islands Regional Evaluation Laboratory is perceived as a source of expert information as evidenced by numerous requests from school districts, educational agencies, organizational affiliates, key individuals, professional associations, other related entities. The LAB is assisting NEASC - New England Association of Schools and Colleges to develop a website on secondary school accreditation standards in order to broaden the visibility of this important work and, at the same time, better inform school personnel. In concert with LAB senior researcher, Tom Wilson and faculty member of Brown University, who has spearheaded research on the methodology of accreditation standards with NEASC, the laboratory has heightened its presence within the region on secondary school restructuring. To quote one interviewee, "The quality of work has been outstanding and thorough."

1. Strengths

- a. Sustained program of work
- b. State and regional acknowledgement of products and progress
- c. Use of experts in the field for advice and consultation

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Continuing expansion of peer review process
- b. Diversifying more the research base for products
- c. Capitalizing on opportunities to attain national reputation and recognition for products and programs

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and sources provided by the Laboratory useful and used by customers?

The following comments represent a cross-section of evaluative comments articulated by customers about the LAB during the recent site visit:

"The LAB is an extremely valuable partner to the schools."

"We really look to the LAB for expertise, access, and monetary support for target areas."

"This is the first professional development activity in which we have participated and from which we have gained so much."

"I have become more reflective as a result of working with the LAB in becoming aware of various learning styles."

Designing projects and providing services lie at the core of what the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory is committed to doing. Central to accomplishing this is the quality of the staff. The competency of this staff is very high and impressive, one which is compatible with the needs and demands of such an intensive project/laboratory. While 50 individuals are currently employed to execute the mission of LAB, it should be noted that the racial/ethnic diversity of the staff leaves something to be desired in view of this very culturally diverse region and the LAB's affiliation with a renowned institution as Brown. Certainly, by successfully addressing this concern, effectiveness of services and utilization of products can be enhanced.

Utility is a positive attribute of the REL. Local school districts use services and products of the laboratory; each state within the region has approached the LAB with varying degrees of interest in requesting assistance from professional staff members, to name two examples. Through technology, conferences, state liaisons, and other sources, the LAB encourages open communication and positive

interaction with customers. At times these contacts are initiated by the LAB, and on other occasions, customers come forth expressing their own needs and aspirations for assistance. The intensive work of the LAB in the urban and culturally diverse school district of Lowell should be cited as a place where there is ongoing communication with the laboratory and sustained effects derived by the district as a result of its affiliation and intensive involvement with the LAB in the area of ESL, bilingual, and content area effectiveness in standards implementation.

During the third year of the LAB's existence, the Rogers School started its own study group growing out of the Signature #1 project. While this represented a first for this school, it also represented an example of a sustainable strategy enveloping the notion that ESL teachers and mainstream teachers can work cooperatively. This project has greatly contributed to making most teachers in the Lowell school system more knowledgeable and confident as they have come to believe more in themselves as a result of their interfacing with the laboratory.

Another appropriate citation is the research and writing of a "white paper" developed with and through the state of Maine's Department of Education which is used throughout the state on a daily basis. It serves as a tool list to guide school systems on how they might set up their own assessment models unique to their districts and meeting state standards simultaneously.

To ensure that products are of high quality and also user-friendly, an external peer review board has been formed. Furthermore, interim progress reports are made available for the purpose of encouraging product use and promoting reciprocal exchange of information and implementation. Not only do these acts create a more wholesome setting for the lab with the region but it simultaneously contributes to broader dissemination of the LAB's products.

1. Strengths

- a. Practical application of products and services as cited by NEASC, principals, teachers
- b. Access to electronic sources for making products useful continually

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Ensuring that products are useful to customers through a variety of modes
- b. Keeping rural isolated and culturally/linguistically diverse persons in mind

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

The organizational chart of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown is designed to support the flow of requests, needs, and services identified by the clientele. The six directors who report directly to the executive director (LAB) are responsible for the following areas: programs and services; dissemination and scaling up; professional development for educational leadership; research and development; technology; administration and finance. Each area is headed by educated and highly professional persons who project openness and dedication to the mission of the LAB. These individuals, likewise, are strongly supported by their immediate supervisor and also by the executive director of the Education Alliance at Brown who is principal investigator for this contract.

A structure is in place to provide for systematic processing of inquiries for products and services from the LAB. Aligning with the process is the designation of a state liaison for each state within the region who reports to the LAB and who represents a direct link to customers. Compatible with this flow of events is the Superintendents Leadership Council that meets and presents the LAB with requests of their own applied research. In the State of Vermont, the Commission of Education and the University of Vermont pursued collaboration with the laboratory on such issues as equity, standards for reading, and professional development schools. Based on the focus of each of these requests, the leadership of the

LAB determines the most appropriate program area through which these grants should be processed.

When necessary, scaling up of certain projects is supported by various alliances in the field. This promotes a greater degree of effectiveness and broader dissemination. In, summation, the LAB is a major player in this partnership. Schools report the need for research data collection, baseline studies to which the LAB responds in terms of priorities and available resources.

1. Strengths

- a. Ability to reorganize priorities toward REL reality in terms of what it can accomplish, given constraints
- b. Aggressive identification of customers and strategic alliances

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Extending resources and sources, including participation in policy development and staffing, to include more rural areas
- b. "Special needs" population of children to be highlighted more for service

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

Student success is typically viewed from several points of view in addition to student achievement through measures such as standardized tests. Among other angles are student retention rates, school attendance patterns, teenage parenting, school violence, course grades, academic promotion, etc. Being that the LAB has been in existence only three years of a five-year contract, it is not unreasonable to learn that there are questions within the laboratory about how does one scale up successes that are being achieved. The question of how much of a difference is the LAB at Brown

making in terms of student success in intensive implementation sites.

To illustrate the extent to which the REL work contributes to improved student success, the evaluator refers to the LAB's specialty area, which is language and cultural diversity, specifically the project in Lowell, Massachusetts, "Implementing Standards with English Language Learners". Over a three year span, the impact of this project can be described as organizing study groups to examine related standards and writing a position paper during year one; writing drafts of curriculum guides for revision in complementing the standards during year two; implementing curriculum guides during year three.

The Lowell teachers were integrally involved in this entire process, planning, writing, and implementing. Toward improved student success, teachers have tremendous influence. So, teachers of English, bilingual teachers, ESL teachers, and mainstream teachers have begun to talk with each other, a dramatic change from pre-LAB participation in standards implementation in the Lowell school district. As teachers talk, share, cooperate, student success is likely to improve.

"People have been very upbeat and positive", states one of the school administrators. Another school district person says, *"I feel more comfortable assessing what, how, why I am doing what I am doing"*. With more ease is the tendency to reach more students and mentor them toward improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites. There is a *"more effective spiral"*.

The LAB has developed a website, produced publications, and made professional presentations especially at the state and regional level; some, but less at the national level. There are a few staff members who chair national association committees such as through TESOL. These represent efforts on the part of the laboratory to contribute to increased knowledge and understanding of educational

issues and effective strategies. Signature Work #1 exemplifies some of this through its program and staff. The bilingual/English as a Second Language emphasis is in tune with national trends in education.

1. Strengths

- a. Addressing issues, dilemmas, and programs of national significance such as “Implementing Standards with English Language Learners”
- b. Collecting substantive data on programs and projects such as teaching English to language minority students
- c. Involvement in collaborating with regional accreditation agency on standards revision for secondary schools

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Student achievement impact remaining in question from LAB projects; need for a sound model for documenting REL work to student success
- b. More national visibility through professional conferences and conventions
- c. Follow-up studies needed on student success

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

This regional education laboratory has been both assertive and responsive in services to states and localities in its region especially as the need pertains to research and development involvement instead of technical assistance, per se. The states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont are in position to draw on the resources of the LAB at Brown toward implementing comprehensive school improvement strategies and their many ramifications. As management of the laboratory indicated, adopting, adapting, and changing represent a

challenge for the staff. In order to develop, disseminate, and implement, the LAB and its alliances must accept the reality that this achievement cannot be met in a linear fashion; it is more concentric.

States and localities in the northeast are very receptive to this relatively new laboratory. Commissioners, board members, school administrators, teachers, policymakers want this better connection with the current LAB, compared to the former one. Thus, a liaison structure evolved with the states toward which there has been a very positive response and heightened effectiveness for those persons committed to school improvement. The Rhode Island Commissioner and the Maine Commissioner are merely two examples of this emergent relationship with this REL. Coming out of this linkage for the State of Rhode Island is a database system for report cards as well as a positive approach to accountability and capacity building. Even the Breaking Ranks Network for Superintendents has chosen to be housed at the LAB at Brown with support from the Rhode Island Commissioner of Education.

The commissioners in New England view the “comprehensive schools” movement as a challenge/task and have collaborated closely with this laboratory as their host. The State of New Hampshire reports the LAB’s interest in school-to-work and acknowledges the latter’s role in facilitating this.

Signature Work #2, with its major thrust on secondary school restructuring, is an opportunity to have tremendous impact in the United States relative to comprehensive school improvement. Using partnerships, the LAB incorporates in its products and services the promise for scaling up in this effort. The Board of Governors’ being commissioner driven and the state liaisons’ being valid represents another basis upon which the REL can assist states and localities. Even parent involvement and governance in New York City represent work areas of the laboratory.

Sustainable strategies for local educators to continue what the LAB is doing are being enforced. The question becomes one of “what do local schools want and how does that fit in the overall scheme of implementation of comprehensive school improvement strategies?” Is the LAB and what it provides represent a customer-friendly focus? Evidence from interviewees and other data sources suggest an affirmative reply. The NANDUTI website is illustrative of the use of collaborative inquiry for school district linkages.

While education reform in the region is certainly a priority, the LAB at Brown recognizes that education initiatives in the region must be integrated throughout its work. Along this line, staff members allocate time and resources to promote priorities of the states and localities, such as the school district of Lowell, Massachusetts and its commitment to implementing standards with English language learners (Signature Work #1). Teachers are key to implementation of these standards and the LAB with Lowell is addressing this, keeping culturally diverse schools in mind.

At the heart of this language project in Lowell are three mutually identified areas: research, professional development, and impact on schools. Both the school district and the laboratory are working jointly in these categories. Qualitative methods are primarily used for guiding the work with “language minority students” focusing on second language acquisition. This being the end of the third year of the project, it is worthy to note the clearly identified site selection criteria which the Lowell school district met:

- A highly culturally diverse district
- Readiness to implement language standards
- Commitment to addressing English language learners
- ESL and bilingual teachers bonding with mainstream teachers

- Schools that have networks for national interfacing

The LAB is devoted primarily to sharing innovative educational approaches throughout the region. As such, policy seminars have been conducted by the laboratory as a way to promote the implementation of these language standards in the schools. The Lowell school sites are an example of this. “Effective models of professional development workshops are also conducted, helping school districts to become more aware of educational opportunities that accompany this movement.” Emerging from this project has been an improvement in critical thinking skills by faculties as reported by interviewees. Teachers are encouraged “to grow by stepping up to the plate”.

The work which the LAB has done in concert with NEASC - New England Association of Schools and Colleges has been exemplary, for there truly has been a partnership in an accreditation standards effort. These two units are cooperating as they open doors for leading a scale-up momentum in New England.

1. Strengths

- a. Influencing policy at regional, state, and local levels
- b. Collaboration on accreditation standards with NEASC
- c. Model project on “Implementing Standards with English Language Learners”
- d. Effective project on “Secondary School Restructuring” throughout the region
- e. Regional workshops sponsored by the LAB at Brown

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Expanding research-based information for regional dissemination
- b. Expanding research-based information for national dissemination

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University has identified language and cultural diversity as its specialty area for this five-year contractual period. The LAB has proposed “to provide a valuable service to its region and develop important resources for schools across the country”. Not only has this REL staffed the program area with highly competent persons, it has also engaged in extensive research and development activities related to their work. Being guided by their five objectives, the LAB ensures that its work on issues pertaining to language and cultural diversity cuts across its major initiatives, interrelating tasks dealing with standards and assessment, professional development, urban reform, and school change.

A spirit of cooperation exists at the national level among the three regional labs for whom language and cultural diversity is a concentration. In addition to the LAB, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory - SEDL and the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning - PREL share this particular focus. The LAB has played, during this initial three-year period, a leadership role among this tri-laboratory group by developing an important resource for educators: “Evolving Framework for Education in a Diverse Society”. Products are shared among labs on this topic and communication links in printed and electronic form have been established as well as face-to-face meetings. This clearly supports the notion that labs should disseminate specialty area products and services within and across regional lines.

The LAB, although chronologically young, has begun to establish an impressive presence in the northeast. Although not limited to, assessment, visitations, research, professional development, and other modes are being used through the Lowell, Massachusetts public schools to engage faculty members in “Implementing Standards with English Language Learners” (Signature Work #1). Both internal and external avenues are pursued through the use of contracts, partners, and alliances support this implementation process.

Challenges such as making assertive efforts to include all sectors of the region in receiving these valuable language and cultural services should consistently be a responsibility of the LAB, particularly in rural and poverty areas. In geographic sections where cultural diversity is historically limited, such as Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, this specialty concentration should be given additional attention in the future.

The specialty area, as perceived by staff and observed through various media and research endeavors, permeates all structures in the LAB and does not stand alone. External to this laboratory, language and cultural diversity through the LAB at Brown impacts the region on policy.

The LAB staff accepts opportunities to present papers on this topic at conferences and seminars, to put ideas in printed form, to engage in research and development activities, and to chair committees and task forces at regional and national levels such as TESOL. Collaborative work on language acquisition with the University of California at Santa Cruz, bilingual education with the University of Lowell, the teaching of English at another local college is ongoing in the laboratory.

The impact of the LAB’s leadership role in implementing standards with English language learners is noted through interviews with school personnel in the field whose evaluations are reflected as follows:

- The project helps in incorporating collaborative learning in teaching and increases levels of communication among students.
- Active learning activities are helping students to see themselves as “experts” and facilitators for each other.
- Lots of planning and coordinating with other teachers take place.

1. Strengths

- a. Reciprocal work with other labs in specialty area of language and cultural diversity
- b. Conducting applied research methods in the field
- c. Agencies and organizations seeking assistance and services from the LAB
- d. Generating some products in various forms
- e. Influencing policy formation in states and the region

2. Areas of needed improvement

- a. Publications in refereed journals
- b. More presence in presenting papers at national conferences/conventions
- c. Expanding attention of services and products to rural and poverty areas
- d. Diversifying staff to be more reflective culturally of the LAB’s region

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory has done an impressive job in organizing itself to meet contractual obligations of the five-year contract. The LAB has taken its mission seriously and in some areas of professional work manifested linkages beyond basic requirements. This may be described as applying the human touch concomitant with professional expertise. It was clear throughout the third year evaluation that the staff cared about its general constituency and wanted to

ensure that services rendered and products generated are in concert with local, state, and regional needs and, at the same time, are related to national educational trends for enhancement of students, parents, educators, policymakers, leaders, and communities in general. Whatever the LAB does should be designed to facilitate students, parents, and the local citizenry.

It is appropriate to indicate that leadership within the Education Alliance and the LAB is very strong in its vision and is very competent to spearhead this laboratory throughout the northeast. It is recommended that a more diverse staff be employed to more adequately reflect the population in this geographical area. It was stated that “everyone who works at the LAB is a disseminator”. This being the case, it is even more critical that services provided and products generated through applied research be reflected by and through a very diverse staff, for the region is in a prime position to model this transcultural theme for other labs and the nation.

Compliments are rendered to individuals who have made it possible for this region to be served by the LAB.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

The following represents a series of observations that evolved from an extensive set of interviews of staff, service recipients and providers, overseers, politicians, and other related individuals affiliated with the LAB at Brown:

1. Strengths

- a. Impressive management team and competent staff
- b. Useful internal and external monitoring of services and products

- c. Focus on the contractual mission of the LAB at Brown
- d. Access to administrative and academic support from a prestigious university
- e. Broad representation on the Board of Governors with dedication
- f. Credibility strong within the region and well connected with affiliates
- g. Devotion to applied research and the generation of appropriate products
- h. Ability to influence educational policies in local, state and regional settings
- i. State liaisons identified and integrally involved in the LAB
- k. Signature Works #1 and #2 in position to continue to offer valuable leadership

2. Areas for Improvement

- a. Need for accessing more opportunities for broader national visibility
- b. Taking increased advantage of research and support capabilities at Brown
- c. Ensuring that the LAB's staff is diverse and reflective of regional heritage
- d. Variation of products, services, materials to be formatted in wider modes